

What the pandemic stimulus means for children who are homeless

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The American Rescue Plan Act, the latest \$1.9 trillion pandemic stimulus plan, includes \$800 million to support children and youth experiencing homelessness.

Jennifer Erb-Downward, a senior research associate at the University of Michigan's Poverty Solutions initiative who studies [family homelessness](#), has been tracking the effect of the pandemic on people without stable housing. She discusses the potential impact of this aid.

What do we know about how the American Rescue Plan Act's \$800 million for youth and [children](#) experiencing homelessness will be spent?

The exact uses of this [funding](#) will vary some by state. Right now, we know this money will be used to support identification, enrollment, school participation and wraparound services for children and youth experiencing homelessness. The money will be distributed through the McKinney-Vento Act, which funnels [federal funding](#) to states and then local school districts to support the education of children who are [homeless](#). This is critical now because during the pandemic the identification of homeless students has decreased. When children who are homeless are not identified they do not receive the support they need to attend and succeed in school.

How does this compare to previous relief packages and typical funding for youth homelessness programs?

The funding in the COVID-19 relief package is a dramatic increase from what was available previously. Based on SchoolHouse Connections' analysis of budget allocations, \$800 million is more than Congress has appropriated for the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness over the last 10 years, combined.

This funding provides a real opportunity not only to identify children who are homeless and support them in school but to connect families with resources that could fundamentally end their homelessness. This is a

transformational opportunity. In addition to McKinney-Vento funding, the latest COVID-19 relief package provides middle- to very [low-income families](#) with a child allowance of \$250-\$300 per month per child. This round of stimulus checks treats children as equals with adults, which means a [family](#) of three will get a check for \$4,200—plus the child allowance payments—even if they had no earnings. The child allowance alone is estimated to decrease child poverty in the United States by 45%. If we can leverage the \$800 million in McKinney-Vento funding to reach [homeless families](#) and children with these resources now, we can fundamentally change the future of hundreds of thousands of children's lives.

You partnered with School House Connection, a national nonprofit working to overcome homelessness through education, to track how schools are responding to children experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. Can you share more about that project?

In the fall of 2020, SchoolHouse Connection conducted a national survey of homeless liaisons in schools on how identification of homeless students during the pandemic compared to the prior year and how the first round of COVID-19 funding was being used to support homeless students. Poverty Solutions worked with SchoolHouse Connection to analyze the survey data in order to find out what trends existed nationally and what we could learn about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homeless students.

What were some of the key findings from that survey of school district homeless liaisons?

The biggest takeaway from the report was that in the midst of the devastating economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, liaisons were identifying fewer children who were homeless. Extrapolating out survey

responses, we found an estimated 420,000 fewer children and youth experiencing homelessness have been identified and enrolled by schools so far this school year. This means vulnerable children are not receiving the support they need to participate in [school](#) or the other basic resources that schools provide—from food to a safe place to be during the day. Lower identification was of particular concern to liaisons surveyed because many perceived that the needs in their community were actually greater as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and that homelessness had likely increased during the same time the number of homeless students identified by schools was going down.

The report also looked at the needs that liaisons were seeing among homeless students that they identified and how Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funding was being used. The top concerns reported were lack of internet, shelter/housing, food and child care. Unfortunately, liaisons indicated that federal education relief funds were not reaching homeless families, children and youth. Only 18% of respondents indicated federal coronavirus relief education funding provided by the CARES Act was being used to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. This last finding, combined with the pandemic's impact on homeless [student](#) identification, is what makes the \$800 million of dedicated funding for homeless students so critical at this time. Without additional dedicated funding, we were not able to support students experiencing homelessness. Now we have an opportunity to turn that around.

What should educators and policymakers consider as they make use of this new \$800 million in support for children and youth who are homeless?

For years, we have not had the resources needed to identify and support all of the children in our schools experiencing homelessness. This

funding provides us with a rare opportunity to not only increase the number of homeless children who can be reached but to potentially connect those children and their families to additional economic resources that could end their homelessness. McKinney-Vento dollars can help this to happen for the country's most vulnerable families, but if we are going to be successful, we have to ensure the U.S. Department of Education guidance on how McKinney-Vento dollars can be used allows these connections to be made. This could be simple things like enabling liaisons to purchase prepaid debit cards, if that enables homeless families without bank accounts to access stimulus checks; or enabling districts to pay for hotel vouchers, if that might connect a family to longer-term housing resources. No one yet knows all of the details for how these programs will be rolled out. The most important thing, therefore, is to have the new McKinney-Vento dollars enable liaisons to be responsive to the needs of homeless families and children that they are identifying in their communities.

More information: Lost in the Masked Shuffle and Virtual Void: Children and youth experiencing homelessness amidst the pandemic, poverty.umich.edu/files/2020/1/...and-Virtual-Void.pdf

Provided by University of Michigan

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